

How Aboriginal studies ceased to be part of natural history

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Abstract

It was once common to include studies of Aboriginal culture and history within the purview of natural history studies. This perspective changed in Victoria from the early 1970s, with the concurrent development of a number of avenues for professional fieldwork and publication related to studying the Aboriginal past. These developments are detailed here along with the long-term impacts they had for the involvement of the FNCV in Aboriginal studies. (*The Victorian Naturalist* 124 (3), 2007, 157–162)

Introduction

Today, many of the interests of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria (FNCV) are given effect through its Special Interest Groups, which collectively take in the widest gamut of natural history. Within the history of the FNCV, however, such groups are relatively recent and represent only the latest configuration of members' interests (Houghton and Presland 2005). In all areas of intellectual pursuit, from time to time the constituent parts change. So it is within the field of 'natural history' and this paper is about one such change.

Once upon a time, it was not unusual to think of the study of Aboriginal culture as part of the purview of natural history. From the earliest days of natural history study in this country, it was commonplace for naturalists to include aspects of Aboriginal culture within their range of interests (Finney 1993). This was largely a function of the European view of so-called 'primitive' cultures as being more closely related to nature than those of the western world. It was partly due also to the fact that, at the time of European settlement of Australia, the discipline of anthropology had not been developed. These perspectives regarding Aborigines remained influential, if not widely current, however, well into the twentieth century, as is evident in both academic and popular writing, as well as in museum practice. For example, works published in the 1970s, such as *The natural history of Sydney* (Various authors 1972), *Natural history of the Adelaide region* (Twidale *et al.* 1976) and *Sense of place* (Seddon 1972), all included chapters on the indigenous people of the respective studied areas. Today, while it is not unusual to

include a chapter, usually near the beginning, about local indigenous culture in local history studies, greater attention is paid to fitting this detail into the context of the wider work.

Within the National Museum of Victoria, the state's primary natural history museum, Aboriginal culture was an integral part of public exhibitions for most of the twentieth century. This aspect of the Museum's work was perhaps largely due to the influence of Baldwin Spencer, Director of the Museum from 1899 to 1927. Spencer's interest in anthropology had developed from his involvement in the Horn expedition of 1894 and he soon formed new collections on behalf of the Museum (Rasmussen 2001).

The attitudes that are evident in such practices would strike naturalists today as old-fashioned at best, and perhaps as something far worse. This is so because the accepted view of the place and worth of Aboriginal studies has changed substantially in the past 30 years. It is clear we no longer think of Aboriginal culture as part of natural history; but when did we stop doing that, and why? What brought about this change? This paper addresses these questions and looks, briefly, at the reasons why the study of Aboriginal culture was lifted out of the realm of natural history and achieved its more rightful place among other human-centred fields of study. In what follows, the activities and publishing of the FNCV are used as primary examples, firstly of the previous views, and secondly, of the changes that have taken place.

Anthropology and the FNCV

The inclusion of Aboriginal culture within the scope of naturalist studies was symptomatic of the wider, societal view of Aborigines, through most of the 20th century. It is not surprising, then, that it was also apparent in the various interests of the FNCV. Since its formation in 1880, the club has been a central force in maintaining both the practice and intellectual framework of natural history in this state. Thus, as the premier natural history body, in its programme of activities and through the pages of its journal, *The Victorian Naturalist*, the FNCV can be said to exemplify the practice of natural history.

In keeping with attitudes within broader society in Australia at the time, papers in Aboriginal studies were regular fare for members of the FNCV for the first century of the Club's existence. Indeed, during the 1920s and '30s, interest amongst members in anthropology in general and Aboriginal subjects in particular was sufficient to warrant forming a special interest group. The Ethnological Section of the FNCV had its inaugural meeting on 7 June 1928, with Alfred Kenyon presiding; Charles Daley was appointed Honorary Secretary (Anon 1928). Both of these men were active at the highest levels of the parent body: Daley had been President of the club from 1922 to 1924, and Kenyon was to hold that position from 1934 to 1935 (Houghton and Presland 2005). The Ethnological Section had a pre-cursor in a group called the Prehistoric Club, which had been formed by Kenyon in the previous year and which met at his home in Heidelberg (Griffiths 1996). In the first year of its life as part of the FNCV, the Ethnological Section met on a monthly basis, mostly at Latham House in Swanston Street, Melbourne. There, members heard lectures and took part in discussions on a wide range of subjects of anthropological and archaeological interest, including the early history of man, native cultures of South Africa and North America, and Aboriginal art and artefacts (Anon 1929).

In addition to these lecture meetings, which were open to all members of the FNCV, field trips to Aboriginal sites within Victoria were organized regularly. Destinations outside of the Melbourne area

for such trips included the Aboriginal stone quarries at Mount William and Cape Liptrap, and shell middens and stone tool scatters along the south Gippsland coast. A number of sites closer to Melbourne were visited frequently also. It is a matter of some regret that the number and frequency of visits to these Aboriginal sites (not always by members of the FNCV, of course), ironically, did them more harm than good. In the absence of any legislative protection, many visitors 'collected' examples of Aboriginal stone artefacts from sites. This occurred in the Altona area when an FNCV group visited shell middens in April 1918 (Anon, 1918) and November 1921 (Anon 1922). The Mount William stone quarry was another favourite site for those people interested in Aboriginal artefacts; it was visited by FNCV members in February 1908 (Anon 1908) and in May 1929 (Kenyon 1929). This collecting activity occurred to the point where, today, the smaller sites such as coastal middens have been virtually denuded of any artefactual material. An archaeological survey of Aboriginal sites in the Melbourne area in 1983, found that stone tool collectors had long-since stripped these sites clean of any useful scientific data (Presland 1983, 1984).

Further indications of the long-standing connections between natural history and Aboriginal studies can be seen in the numerous articles on Aboriginal culture that have appeared in the Club's journal. Although articles and shorter pieces on Aboriginal studies were published regularly throughout this period, the subject matter was never a major focus for the journal. In the 100 years of its publication, from 1884 to 1983, *The Victorian Naturalist* carried 342 articles relating to Aboriginal culture (Hall 1979). From the beginning of the twentieth century these articles averaged just over three per year, except for two peak periods – during the 1920s this average lifted to about six per annum; and during the 1960s it reached eight per annum.

A few of the writers of these pieces were specialists in Aboriginal studies or in anthropology, but the great majority were not; they were individuals with an interest in the natural world, and who thought of

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Compiled by KN Bell

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